DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 129 471 PS 008 901

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TITLE Preschool Education in State Offices of Education: A 1976 Status Report.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 10p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Child Care; *Government Role; Nursery Schools; *Preschool Education; Public Policy; Public Support; *State Departments of Education; State Programs; *State Surveys; Teacher Education

ABSTRACT

This study surveyed existing preschool education programs and practices in the State Offices of Education in the 50 states. A survey instrument (Information Form on Preschool Education), mailed to 50 chief state school officers, contained questions in three areas of preschool education: (1) general information (2) personnel commitment and (3) accommodations made available by State Offices of Education to assist schools. The completed survey instrument was returned by 40 states. Findings are summarized in terms of percentages of State Offices of Education indicating existing provisions for the development of preschool education. No national trend was shown, with the status of preschool education varying from state to state. Many states reported involvement in curriculum development, in-service education, and the development of basic guidelines for preschool educators. A majority of the state offices had developed some philosophical statement concerning quality preschool education, but only some had allocated funds to support their belief. Other findings include the fact that a large majority of the offices were working with universities on developing courses of study, certification requirements, and/or teacher training programs. Many had developed curriculum guides and/or material for dissemination. It was emphasized that, although an expansion of child care facilities is anticipated, evidence indicates that many states lack mandated guidelines to insure quality preschool education. (BF)

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ED129471

PRESCHOOL EDUCATION IN STATE OFFICES OF EDUCATION: A 1976 STATUS REPORT

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1976
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PS008901

INTRODUCTION

The concept of preschool education is now being recognized as a vital issue of concern to professional educators and lay citizens. For example, in the past ten years nursery school enrollment has tripled to the current status of 1.6 million. At the same time the American Federation of Teachers organization has proposed a 40 billion dollar preschool education program to be housed in existing public school facilities. (U.S. News & World Report, 1976, 41-42).

Psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and educators have stressed the importance of human development during the infant and preschool years. It is now believed that the "first four to six years are the most important in determining the basic nature of cognitive, emotional, and social behavior patterns." (Bronfenbrenner, U., et. al., 1973, pp. 117-119). A series of psychological studies are synthesized in a more recent report on infant development and further substantiate that the early years of life are marked by much physical, intellectual, and social growth and development. (Lake, Alice., 1976, pp. 22, 27, 128, 129).

As educators and psychologists are in agreement on the significance of what happens in the preschool years of human development it would seem feasible to examine the current status of preschool education at a state level. In the same respects, as State Offices of Education are usually the vehicles for implementing, coordinating, and evaluating instructional programs in their states, they would appear to be a major part of any effort to provide for quality preschool education programs in their states.

Thus the focus of this study was to examine the status of preschool education as it exists within the State Offices of Education in the fifty states.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The major purpose of this study was to find out what current preschool education programs and practices exist in the State Offices of Education in the fifty states. The following question statements reflect further sub-components examined in this study.

1. Do State Offices of Education have a specific division, department, or section of their office devoted entirely to the problems and prospects of preschool education?

2. Do State Offices of Education have staff that are assigned entirely to work on preschool education?

3. Do State Offices of Education have a budget line item restricted for use in preschool education?

4. Do State Offices of Education have a written statement of objectives which outlines desired activities in preschool education in their state?

5. Do State Offices of Education have developed curriculum guides or state guidelines for preschool educators in their state to use in implementing their programs?

6. Do State Offices of Education have staff assigned to work in the schools in the state to assist preschool educators in implementing their programs?

7. Do State Offices of Education have evaluation criteria for evaluating preschool programs in their states?

8. Do State Offices of Education have innovative or exemplory state funded preschool programs in their state?

METHOD OF STUDY

A survey instrument (Information Form on Preschool Education) was developed by the researcher to gather data on the status of preschool education in State Offices of Education in the fifty states. The instrument contained questions regarding three areas of preschool education: (1) general information about preschool education, (2) personnel committment to preschool education, and (3) accomodations made available by State Offices of Education to assist schools with various facets of preschool education.

The survey instrument was mailed to the fifty chief state school officers of each state. They were asked to have the appropriate person in their office to complete the survey form and return it to the researcher in the stamped, self-addressed envelope included in each form mailed.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Forty states returned the survey instrument in a completed manner. The completed survey forms were tabulated and the data categorized into a useable format. A summary of the findings of the study, based upon the tabulation of data received, is reported as follows.

1. Thirty six percent of the State Offices of Education participating in the study had a division or department of preschool in their organizational system.

2. Sixty one percent of the State Offices of Education participating in this study had some statement of philosophy with regards to preschool education in their states.

3. Fifty eight percent of the State Offices of Education had specific guidelines or mandated legislation on the quality of preschool education programs in their states.

4. Three percent of the State Offices of Education participating in this study had a specific model developed for preschool educators to utilize in their program development.

5. Thirty three percent of the State Offices of Education participating in this study had evaluation teams that monitored preschool programs in their states. NOTE: It should be mentioned that evaluation visits varied greatly from state to state among those states that did have evaluation visitations.

6. Sixty percent of the State Offices of Education participating in this study reported they had curriculum specialists in preschool education assisting preschool educators in their states with in-service education and curriculum development.

7. Seventy Eight percent of the State Offices of Education participating in this study reported they were working with institutions of higher education in their states to insure appropriate training for preschool teachers.

8. Forty two percent of the State Offices of Education participating in this study reported they were currently involved in conducting surveys or research studies in the public schools concerning preschool education.

9. Thirty three percent of the State Offices of Education participating in this study reported they did allocate funds for the development of preschool programs at the local level in their states.

10. Sixty four percent of the State Offices of Education participating in this study reported they develop curriculum materials to aid school districts with the development of preschool programs.

DISCUSSION

The status of preschool education in State Offices of Education within the fifty states, as indicated by the findings of this study, varies from state to state. No national trend emerges in terms of preschool education activity at the state level. Probably the best that can be said is that many states are involved in curriculum development, in-service education, and the development of some basic

guidelines for preschool educators to tuilize in developing and implementing their programs.

Even when one considers that some states place the job of preschool education in social welfare divisions or child-family divisions the survey results of this study have important implications for the preschool education movement.* Questions such as the following need to be considered by those responsible for preschool education at the state level.

1. If a federal plan for massive development of preschool education was funded, could State Offices of Education handle the job given current situations in some states?

2. As preschool education currently exists in many states, what can State Offices of Education do to assure that such preschool programs are indeed of a high quality?

Questions such as the above need to be examined by those responsible for preschool education in their states. The current status of infant and preschool care is not what it should be given what we know about this stage of human development.

A very positive finding of this study was that a majority (sixty one percent) of State Offices of Education had developed some philosophical statement concerning preschool education in their states. The fact that only thirty three percent of the State Offices of Education participating in this study had allocated funds to support their philosophical belief in quality preschool education may be more of a

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*One State did report they were not the office handling preschool education in the state. They did refer the inventory to the social services division officer of the state and it was completed and returned to the researcher.

reflection of a lack of national commitment to this facet of education than an indictment of the States.

Other positive findings of this study include the fact that a large majority (seventy eight percent) of State Offices of Education participating in this study were cooperatively working with universities in their states on developing courses of study, certification requirements, and/or teacher training programs for future teachers of preschool children. In the same positive vein sixty four percent had developed some type of curriculum guides and/or material for dissemination to preschool education in the states.

Although some states have defined minimum child care standards for operating preschool programs, the situation is not much better than Bronfenbrenner described in 1973. (Bronfenbrenner, U., et. al., 1973, pp. 117-119). This is a national tragedy and should not be considered the sole responsibility of the states. Rather, more alert citizenry at the local level is our best hope for creating some national commitment to quality chold care for all children at all stages of their development.

It is clear that educational leaders at the State level have initiated some steps to begin a move to develop good preschool education programs. Yet the task is urgent and demanding that all education formulate and implement a program that will bring quality care to all preschoolers who exist in our society.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

If current trends continue (and there seems to be no observable

data to indicate a reversal of these trends) more and more children will need some care outside the home during the infant and preschool years of development. Thus an increase in child care facilites seems certain. The question of the quality of this care is not so certain. Evidence gathered in this study indicates that many states still have no mandated guidelines for assuring children of quality preschool education environments. And, with more stringent budgets confronting many State Education Offices the prospects for developing quality preschool education programs is in question.

If researchers in the field of human development are correct that the first six years of life are of vital significance to the long term character and personality of the child the current status of preschool education is unacceptable at all levels of operations.** State Offices of Education are the primary source of leadership for formulating quality education in their states. They must undertake a sincere and continuous effort to make life safe, sound, enriching, and meaningful for every preschooler in their state. And, all facets of local, regional, and national communities are responsible to help them in this effort.

**See Bronfenbrenner reference in this manuscript for further documentation.

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